

Building an Online Presence for Live Theatre: Experience from the Field

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Dot coms. Dot gones. We're all hearing the anxiety in the tech industry about what types of business activities will succeed online. Those who set themselves up as Internet-only enterprises are having the roughest time. Others, who use the Internet as one of several channels or tools to deliver an offline product or service, are finding their online presence more productive. Many theatres across the country are looking for strategies that will enhance the company's work, extend the patron's online experience and significantly impact the box office.

It's becoming very clear that organizations and businesses with a history of solid customer service and quality product delivery will succeed online. There are already two major Internet enterprises among the long-term winners — investor services/stock trading and travel/entertainment ticketing.

Online investor services now account for more daily activity than ever before in the history of the New York Stock Exchange or NASDAQ. It is the real-time delivery of stock and company performance information that influences decisions and drives the trading volume on the Internet. No wonder we see such fierce competition to deliver useful news and key statistics that investors can trust. It is hard to imagine buying stocks "the old fashioned way" ever again.

Today, airlines average 14% of all sales, up from 9% last year (*New York Times*, July 2001), through online ticketing — and Southwest Airlines is the industry leader with 36%. Many companies are offering special incentives or spot discounts and related services like hotel and car rental reservations. Soon these sites will be adding comprehensive information about local events at the traveler's destination, including theatre. Behind the scenes, powerful computer systems and industry players are mining every potential customer service perk and enhancement that can influence a traveler's decision to purchase tickets and build brand loyalty. The systems are not perfect yet, but anyone who has purchased tickets online over the last three years will agree the services are becoming more innovative and easy to use with 24/7 convenience.

Surveys show that over 70% of all travelers get to their destination before making final decisions about their entertainment options. Boeing is building Internet connections for travelers on its planes, and one of the online services offered will be information on cultural events at the passenger's destination. Wow — talk about a captive audience! How can I make sure my theatre's events are on that service? And how can I make it easy for that traveler to purchase tickets when he/she is flying at 33,000 feet over Iowa? We'll have to wait and see.

Good news for the arts and theatre? Online ticket sales are growing rapidly. Online transactions are becoming more convenient and the public's trust in safety is rising. Ticketmaster reported late last year that 23% of its single ticket sales were conducted online, with the largest percentages resulting from concert sales. Theatres across the country are reporting similar success stories. Our company's share of single ticket sales online has increased from 2% in 1998 to 15% in 2000 to nearly 20% in 2001. But hold on. What's getting people connected, engaged and buying?

Build Strong Objectives Into Your Online Strategies.

If we just build a site, they'll find us. That strategy rarely worked offline, why would it work for an online business? An online strategy must support real-world objectives and play a role in a company's marketing and communication mix.

- First and foremost: a useful site must support the onstage and backstage work. Websites are a perfect forum for disseminating expansive information about productions, advocacy, mission, experiments and soliciting feedback.
- Online ticketing is a significant sales channel. Within the next few years, it could command nearly 50% of single ticket sales.
- The general public expects companies they do business with to have a website.
- Email is a cost-effective way to engage patrons with outbound promotions linked to inbound online sales.

Who's Online and What Should We Be Paying Attention To?

Surfing the web is becoming a thing of the past. The “new toy” era is over for most Internet users. People are online for specific activities such as gathering information, conducting financial transactions and communicating with other people. The online population is no longer comprised of boys, techies and nerds. In 2001, *PC Magazine* reported that 62% of the American public is connected on the Internet at home or at work, up from 55% last summer. Our company's surveys show that more than 80% of our audience is online.

Seniors and women were among the fastest growing Internet user groups in the last 18 months. For many of the established theatres where 65% of the ticket buyers are women, plus significant patronage from seniors, this is good news. Thanks to the easy user-friendly environment of America Online (used by 54% of our online audience) seniors feel comfortable online and with email. Who has the most time for cruising online? Seniors. Webmasters should be mindful that seniors purchase low-cost and low-powered computers, with slow 56K modems, and seniors are less likely upgrade to faster machines or DSL. Moreover, to accommodate seniors online, webmasters should make sure that their sites are as uncomplicated as possible, without add-ons like Shockwave and Flash, and that the site works smoothly on a slow computer with AOL.

For the Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y who have built the Internet into their lifestyles, the news gets even better. Rapid information services are key for keeping this audience engaged. Searching the web is a hassle if the company or event they want doesn't pop to the top of the search list. Once these users get to a site, they want up-to-date information and the ability to drill down for more details.

What Do Online Patrons Want?

Our company conducted surveys in each of the last three years. In order of preference, the findings were consistent:

- Ability to purchase tickets and choose locations from an online seating map. Customers want online access to the same seat locations available when they call or walk up to the box office — and in this day and age, they should have it. They may spend time searching various performances to get the better seat. Currently only a few websites offer seating maps (www.SeatAdvisor.com). Other sites (Tickets.com and Ticketmaster) pick and show only the “best available” seats for purchase. In the future companies, such as Intellitix (Atlanta, GA), expect to have fast-loading webpages showing maps of all available seats. As an industry, we need to band together and demand better customer service options from our online ticket software or service providers.
- Comprehensive information about productions and events. Patrons are willing to read more than standard 75- or 100-word descriptions about productions. In fact, they are demanding it. Companies can engage patrons by providing more background, study guides, photos and even posting the “house program” online. 30-second video clips are currently permitted by Actor's Equity to be posted online. We all need to take a clue from the online stock trading industry — quality information fosters investment.
- People want email. Contrary to the naysayers, the majority of people want email from the businesses that they trust, but they want control over what comes to their inbox. Technology allows users to customize their internet relationships and interactive experiences -- to make choices about where they receive email (many people have more than one email box), to indicate preferences for subject matter, and to opt-out of future email at any time. Our company's surveys have clearly shown that patrons like receiving breaking news or getting a special perk or accessing tickets before the

general public. And why not? Email broadcasting is easy and virtually free, but there are a few key considerations:

- Establish a clear privacy policy and post it online. It will soon be mandatory by law, so now is the best time to put a policy in place if you do not have one. Privacy policies are easy to find online and to adapt for your company's use.
- Permit the patron to un-subscribe at any time, and make it easy to do so.
- Don't trade your email list with another company. It's okay for you to send an email to your list with a link to the other company's site and vice versa. In fact, your patrons (or theirs) may appreciate your recommendations.
- Broadcast regularly, but not too frequently. Many people hate getting the weekly newsletter. But don't disappear for a month either. People will forget they subscribed to your list if they don't hear from you. Find a schedule that works for you and your patrons.
- Keep email messages as short as possible with links back to your site for more information. People respond better to a brief email.
- For now, use text rather than HTML with graphic downloads. Most computers still use slow modems. A patron can become angry if he or she did not anticipate downloading a large graphic file to his or her inbox. In the next two years, sending graphic files will become much simpler and faster.
- Surprise people with features or services they would not expect. Most patrons will trust your company's recommendations for attending other theatres, purchasing books, making dinner reservations or providing links to other general information or educational sites. I would also make the following suggestions:
 - Set up a page to support your company's gift shop.
 - Links to Amazon.com. It is easy to link specific books, scripts, CDs, DVDs, or video tapes to your website. Amazon.com handles all aspects of product sale and will pay you 5% of each transaction (check out the Associates program at Amazon.com). You probably will not see much revenue, but your patrons will appreciate the choice in service whether they use it or not.
 - Many patrons want to know where to find information about specific subjects directly related to or associated with the work onstage. Dramaturgs or literary managers are great resources for finding links. And if your company is presenting any work by Shakespeare, the number of quality links is astonishing.
 - Information services are terrific customer service tools. Create a recommended restaurant list, or link to another site that maintains a good list of local restaurants like the Chamber of Commerce. MapQuest.com has easy-to-use map services to provide patrons with directions to your events. Some cities support online freeway maps showing traffic congestion to avoid while on the way to the theatre.

Promotions: Driving People to the Site.

Building a website is expensive and time consuming. You want visitors. Lots of them. Getting visitors to your site is not as difficult as you may think. In general, the same tried-and-true techniques for building awareness is true for the Internet: advertise.

Maintain high visibility for the site. Our company's site averages between 70,000 and 80,000 actual visitors per month and has spiked as high as 105,000. Online statistical software, such as Web Trends, can monitor what users are doing while visiting our web site. The reports can't tell us who was there, but they can tell us just about everything else about what the users did on each visit, from pages visited to how long they were on the site, from what they typed to get there to the exit page, and much more, 9% of our patrons find the site by using a search engine, while the majority or 91% type in one of our URL addresses. Our URL address is always the same font size and position as our phone number in advertising, direct mail and all promotional materials. Most come to purchase tickets or find information about specific performances.

The Mark Taper Forum and its sister theatre, the Ahmanson, has an email list of 62,000 people. It is growing at the rate of about 1,000 to 2,000 email addresses per month. Roughly 85% of the addresses are collected

through online transactions or by our box office and phone staff at the time of sale. The rest of them come through people signing up on our site or entering our online “Win Tickets” promotions.

Webmasters may need to consider multiple URL addresses, especially if the theatre's name ends in theatre. From our online reports, we see an almost equal number of people typing in AhmansonTheatre.com as AhmansonTheater.com. Our company maintains eight URL addresses, all pointing to the same home page. I also recommend capitalizing long, multiple-name addresses — they are much easier to read: www.MarkTaperForum.com versus www.marktaperforum.com.

The Future of the Internet: Customer Service Management is Objective ONE.

In the future, online customer service will become even better, but we must collectively put pressure on our ticketing software and service providers to deliver the enhancements. Marketing and Sales Directors should take the lead by compiling new online sales features to which the public will be responsive. Aggressively pitching software providers at the time of upgrades or at the annual INTIX Conferences can help. Some features we can implement today, on our own. Others will require major ticketing software upgrades that allow richer interfaces with our box office systems. Promotional or sales ideas are endless...here are a few.

Email Post Cards. Production photos can be posted online with a button next to each one. Site visitors can click the button and send the photo to friends.

Restaurant Reservations. Few restaurants are capable of handling email effectively. But they all have fax machines. After purchasing tickets online, the thank you page should have a link to a list of restaurants and hotels with the ability to allow the user to make an online reservation. The system should then send an automatic fax to the restaurant manager and he or she can follow up with a confirmation.

Account-based Online Sales. For many theatres, online ticket sales means outsourcing the service to an outside business and usually the seats are not prime, or even the best available locations. For other theatres with direct links between the site and an internal database or “backend,” the level of service is often limited to full-price sales. Future ticketing software should allow a full range of ticketing options.

- Online access to best available seats in real time.
- Ticket exchange for subscribers and donors.
- Discounted tickets “authorized” by a key code or access number.
- Group sales. An automatic discount or perks for volume purchases.
- Travel agents. Permitting tickets to be packaged with hotel reservations.
- Concierges. Allowing a commission for tickets purchased.
- Subscription ordering *and* renewal.

Anyone who does business with Amazon.com will appreciate that company's customer perks that arrive by email such as: discounts for birthdays, anniversaries, gift certificates and packaging for special occasions.

Sponsor or radio and television tie-ins. Sponsors are anxious for promotional tie-ins with their own websites and events. By allowing special sponsor-related discounts or access to tickets in advance of the general public, theatres can get free or low-cost placement on corporate or media websites.

Target Marketing. As database-driven websites become more common, our ability to target patrons and potential patrons with email will become increasingly more lucrative. However, privacy issues will continue to be the topic of much debate as federal and state legislation comes down the pike. Personalization will more critical to build patron affiliation and loyalty.

The Internet is a tool for delivering effective communications and motivating sales. As website and email software becomes easier to use, the Internet will be as indispensable as the morning newspaper. Like the newspaper industry, theatre companies must develop a keen Internet strategy to keep the public's attention engaged. Moreover, organizations that fail to develop their skills for using the Internet or adapt to the new communications techniques email has to offer will be seriously left behind. Fortunately, theatrical organizations are in a perfect position, right now, to take advantage of the current consumer trends toward purchasing tickets and gathering information for their entertainment investments.